

January 12, 2009 - MICHELE NORRIS, host:

From NPR News, this is All Things Considered. I'm Michele Norris.

MELISSA BLOCK, host:

And I am Melissa Block. The current U.S. Army is one of the most battle-hardened in the nation's history. The Army may also be at the breaking point. Seven years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq have taken a toll on troops, on tanks and trucks, and on the Army's leaders. All this week, we'll be examining the state of the Army. Today NPR Pentagon correspondent JJ Sutherland reports on how soldiers train and whether by preparing to fight the last war, they'll be ready for the next war. He went looking for answers at the Army's premier training ground.

JJ SUTHERLAND: As the troops start their day, the sunrise casts light across more than a thousand square miles of sand, and rocks, and dust. This is the National Training Center. It sits high in California's Mojave Desert.

(Soundbite of helicopter)

SUTHERLAND: From the sky, the landscape seems almost empty. The occasional patrol raises plumes of dust that hang suspended in the dawn air, a still life of brown cloud and blue sky. But not too many years ago, hundreds of tanks rumbled through this open desert, mass artillery boomed.

Lt. Col. STEVE SMITH (Artillery Officer, U.S. Army): The center of gravity of our enemy then was mechanized forces - his artillery. It was pure force on force.

SUTHERLAND: Lieutenant Colonel Steve Smith was here a decade ago. He's an artillery officer, the branch of the Army known as the King of Battle.

Lt. Col. SMITH: It was purely our Army and our Air Force is going to destroy your army and your air force and your equipment, and when we do that, we win and we go home.

SUTHERLAND: Now Smith is back at the National Training Center preparing for a very different kind of war. Where there used to be 10 massive tank exercises each year, now there are none. Instead, the Army has built a little piece of Afghanistan. In this exercise, one of Colonel Smith's small combat outposts has just come under attack from the Taliban - mortars and machine guns.

(Soundbite of Army training exercise)

Lt. Col. SMITH: Roger. Counter fire at grid location ...

SUTHERLAND: Smith is with the 25th Infantry Division. He's commander of Task Force Steel, that's about 800 soldiers. He is leading his troops from a tactical operation center, or TOC, a couple of miles from the fight.

(Soundbite of Army training exercise)

Unidentified Man: We have a total of six U.S. WIA and six enemy KIA at this time. Over.

(Soundbite of handheld radio)

SUTHERLAND: Six wounded Americans and six enemy killed. At the command post, about a dozen men sit at two rows of tables. Computers and radios are scattered about. The soldiers talk with each other and other units over the Internet, in a special chat room called the jabber. Sometimes Col. Smith just uses his cell phone.

(Soundbite of cell phone call)

Lt. Col. SMITH: Hey, is anybody on the radio down there, on the re-ab(ph)? OK, is that re-ab down there.

(Soundbite of Army training exercise)

Lt. Col. SMITH: Imagine that it's a 105-mm howitzer and you're the section chief, OK?

Unidentified Man: Yes, sir.

Lt. Col. SMITH: When we get in contact you are on the freaking weapon system, OK?

SUTHERLAND: In this kind of warfare, the radio is your most powerful weapon. Col. Smith wants it to be second nature for his troops. When you make contact with the enemy get on the local airwaves. The idea is to get the message out that the enemy Taliban are the problem.

Lt. Col. SMITH: The center of gravity now is the people. So we have to think and be a lot smarter in how we do business and understand not only their culture but their problems, their issues, and how we can best help them solve those problems and issues, and not so much concentrated on destroying enemy forces.

SUTHERLAND: Smith said that change wasn't easy for him or for the Army.

Lt. Col. SMITH: If you were to ask me five years ago, I would say absolutely it's a hard choice you make, but I think now five years into it, it's not so hard to make. I think we've been down the road enough times, we've had enough deployments not - speaking for myself, I know I have to make that switch.

SUTHERLAND: That switch has sparked a debate inside the Army over what missions it can perform and how it should train its soldiers. The training lately is all about counterinsurgency. Some in the Army are wondering if the pendulum has swung too far.

Major NEAL SMITH (Operation Officer, Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center): We Obviously can't go back to the extreme we were in 2003 where the force knew virtually

nothing about advising in counterinsurgency and all these other things. But we also can't go to a force where if a tank division is needed someday that nobody knows how to defend, attack, or move to contact anymore.

SUTHERLAND: That's Major Neal Smith. I met him 1,500 miles from the NTC in a quiet office at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the heart of the Army's educational system. Major Smith is the operations officer of the Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center. He teaches people how to fight the kind of wars we're in now in Iraq and Afghanistan. But even he worries about what today's soldiers are not being taught - how to fight a classic ground war.

Major SMITH: The risk we run as a force is we have a generation of officers that will have spent five to six years and never have done their conventional competency, and that if we were expected on a short notice at this point to fulfill that conventional competency, we would struggle very hard to do it as well as we did in 2003 during the attack to Baghdad.

SUTHERLAND: The problem, there simply isn't enough time to teach people how to fight both conventional and unconventional wars. The soldiers are simply at war too much. Troops now only have about 12 months between deployments. Lt. General William Caldwell runs the Combined Arms Center for the Army. He oversees 18 different schools and training centers including the NTC.

Lt. General WILLIAM CALDWELL (Combined Arms Center, U.S. Army): The reality is we've really only have enough time to prepare soldiers for the next mission that they're about to face. Then as time permits, we in fact, will ensure that we operate across the whole continuum of intensity of operations.

SUTHERLAND: The Army says they won't be able to really begin training for all kinds of warfare until 2010 at the earliest.

(Soundbite of helicopter)

SUTHERLAND: So for now the focus is on hearts and minds, not tanks and artillery. Flying over the National Training Center, it could be Afghanistan. The rocks are the same. The mountains look the same. The dust - that ever-present talcum-fine powder that gets into everything, that's the same, too. Helicopters are loaded up with water and food and ammo, even howitzers. They are lifting supplies to remote bases in the mountains.

In Afghanistan, Lt. Col. Steve Smith's task force will be spread out in small bases, too, with just a few dozen troops in each.

(Soundbite of Afghani music)

SUTHERLAND: The soldiers will operate near Afghan villages. To get the troops ready, the NTC has built a dozen towns in the California desert. One of them is called Medina Wasl. It's Hollywood's version of an Islamic village, but it does the trick: there is a mosque, a market, a battered hotel, even a butcher shop. They're made out of shipping containers, but plastered with

authentic-looking brick and concrete. It's here that Lt. Eric Hall is learning counterinsurgency. His patrol found a bomb on a market street. Good job, he thought, then he tried to convince the local shopkeepers to stay away from it.

(Soundbite of Army exercise)

Lt. ERIC HALL (U.S. Army): Do you understand the danger from this bomb on the street?

Unidentified Man: (Arab spoken)

Lt. HALL: The bomb could still hurt you from where it is.

Unidentified Man: He said I don't care. They want to die. So I just...

Lt. HALL: He said that?

Unidentified Man: Yeah.

SUTHERLAND: Lt. Hall is coming to appreciate just how complicated and frustrating the art of irregular warfare can be. For now, it's the only thing the Army is teaching. JJ Sutherland, NPR News.

BLOCK: Tomorrow we'll visit West Point where the Army's next generation learns about fighting insurgencies from peers.

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